

For depot, a new purpose

Repairing military equipment a possible post-shuttle goal

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Until NASA's next spacecraft begins flying, the agency hopes to keep the doors open at the workshop that repairs and refurbishes the orbiter's mechanical and electronic equipment.

Repairing military equipment returning from the Middle East could provide temporary work for up to 300 engineers and technicians at the NASA Shuttle Logistics Depot, operated by United Space Alliance at 8550 Astronaut Blvd.

The 300,000-square-foot facility already has begun work for the Department of Defense, machining a barrel extension and other parts for .50-caliber machine guns and creating a part to refurbish the wings of the F-16 fighter jet.

"We have a skilled set of engineers, technicians and support staff that we need to keep here," USA deputy associate program manager Jim Kell told a gathering of nearly 50 elected officials and government representatives.

They hope to hold on to experienced workers after the shuttle stops flying, until the space industry ramps back up.

The NSLD could avoid a shutdown by serving the Defense Department or attracting commercial business. Technicians who repair the shuttles' 30-year-old avionics and systems could repair the military's aging weapons systems.

"We've found that our skills and the equipment in this facility are a direct match to support (Defense)," Kell said.

Despite the optimism of officials, Congress must vote to pay for the military refurbishments.

"There is no commitment on the (Defense Department's) part to put additional work here," said Frank DiBello, president of Space Florida, a state agency that supports the space industry. "We have to compete for it."

U.S. Reps. Suzanne Kosmas and Bill Posey attended Monday's meeting. Both said they would work to secure money for the Defense Department to fund the program at the NSLD.

About 7,000 space industry jobs could be lost when the shuttle stops flying in 2010 or 2011. Brevard County officials are seeking to replace those jobs through a combination of federal, space-industry and other private contracts.

Work possibly done at the NSLD in Cape Canaveral would be subcontracted from other companies that specialize in repairing large pieces of military equipment.

"We'll never be one of the major overhaul depots that exists for the Defense Department," said Richard Covey, USA president and chief executive officer and a four-time shuttle astronaut. "It's likely we're going to be a subcontractor to someone else."

Avionics, mechanical systems and manufacturing new and replacement pieces for military systems such as vehicles, airplanes and helicopters could be performed at the NSLD.

"We won't ever see a full (weapon) system come through here," Covey said.

He estimated as many as 300 could remain employed, but called that optimistic.

"If we keep 100 people employed, that will give us a good base to sustain this program," Covey said.

Additional Facts

NASA Shuttle Logistics Depot

- Opened 1996.
- 300,000 square feet.
- Eight buildings

- 75 percent of shuttle avionics built or repaired there.

At NASA's Shuttle Logistics Depot in Cape Canaveral, government representatives take a tour of the facility. Leading the tour is Jim Kell, left, deputy assistant program manager; U.S. Reps. Bill Posey and Suzanne Kosmas; and State Reps. Steve Crisafulli and Thad Altman. (Tim Shortt, FLORIDA TODAY)